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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000256

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SUBJECT: CARDINAL PREDICTS FURTHER BRV PRESSURE ON CHURCH

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR WILLIAM R. BROWNFIELD,
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. Ambassador had lunch February 1 with Cardinal Jorge Cardenal Urosa Savino at the Papal Nuncio's residence. The Venezuelan Cardinal predicted continued Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) pressure against the Catholic Church, noting that the BRV is trying to wrest control of the Church's social programs and to impose ideologically-charged changes on the Church's education system. The Cardinal said the Venezuelan Catholic Church enjoys close ties with the American Catholic Church, would welcome closer ties with U.S. business, but is wary of cooperating directly with the USG. The Venezuelan Church may send a few priests to southern Florida to help minister to the growing Venezuelan population there. The Cardinal ruled out a papal visit to Venezuela when Pope Benedict XVI travels to the CELAM conference in Brazil in May, but acknowledged that a brief refueling stop in Venezuela could be a symbolic boost to a Church under increasing government pressure. End Summary.

Public Enemies One and Two

¶2. (C) The Papal Nuncio organized a February 1 lunch for Cardinal Jorge Cardenal Urosa Savino and the Ambassador at the Ambassador's request. The Papal Nuncio and his DCM also attended. The Cardinal is sensitive about meeting publicly with the Ambassador and provoking President Chavez' ire, and the Nuncio's residence provides a convenient place to exchange views.

¶3. (C) The Cardinal and Ambassador reviewed Chavez' recent public attacks on both of them. The Cardinal, and the other three members of the executive board of the Venezuelan Bishops' Conference, were blasted by Chavez for light criticism of his plans to amend the constitution in his favor and give himself emergency decree powers. The Ambassador was threatened with expulsion for suggesting that nationalizations should be done in a legal way with just compensation. The Cardinal thought Chavez had taken another major step toward authoritarianism. He predicted tough years ahead for the Church in Venezuela. He predicted Chavez would work gradually to insert his supporters into the governing bodies that oversaw Church social, humanitarian, health, education, and even religious programs. That was the long

term threat to the Church being hollowed out from the inside.

Contacts With U.S. Catholic Church

¶4. (C) The Ambassador asked the Cardinal to assess the degree of support he was receiving from the United States. Urosa said the U.S. Catholic Conference had set up a committee of four bishops to support Latin American programs and churches, particularly in Venezuela, and the committee is working well.

Catholic Relief Services (CRS) is now providing some direct support to Caritas Venezuela. But he also expressed concern about the Church's regular, ongoing social, health, and education programs outside Caritas' humanitarian mandate, especially in the wake of the retirement last year of the Archbishop of Washington, an important ally. He needs a senior U.S. prelate to provide leadership to U.S. Catholic Church efforts to support the Venezuelan Church. He had probed the Archbishop of Los Angeles, but found his focus more on Mexico. He probed the Archbishop of Miami, but concluded he too was soon retiring. He thought the Archbishop of Chicago, who spoke good Spanish, was a possible choice.

U.S. Embassy Support

¶5. (C) The Ambassador reminded the Cardinal that the Embassy, through its USAID and public diplomacy programs, could provide some support to the Church's education and health programs. We could also facilitate contact between them and the U.S. private sector in Venezuela. The Cardinal thought direct support from the USG right now would provoke too much backlash from the BRV. He noted how savagely the NGO Sumate was still being attacked for accepting only \$31,000 from the

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USG. He liked the idea of asking U.S. business for support.

Papal Visit

¶6. (C) The Ambassador asked the Cardinal for his thoughts on the prospect of a brief, even refueling stop, by Pope Benedict XVI on his way to or from the CELAM conference in Brazil in May. The Nuncio winced. The Cardinal said (to the Nuncio, s evident relief) that he did not believe there was any chance for a Papal visit at this time. Chavez would not invite him. The Ambassador asked if a 45-minute stopover at the airport to take on fuel, during which time he might meet with the bishops, might be possible. The Cardinal thought that might be worth one more try with the Vatican (and the Nuncio, s body language improved from pained to merely uncomfortable). The Cardinal agreed that any stop would be symbolically important, and a brief, technical stop to refuel would seem the best way to accomplish that without burdening the Pope with additional trip responsibilities.

Education Law

¶7. (C) The Cardinal predicted that the new Education Law would be the biggest BRV challenge to the Church this year, citing four areas where the law would contest the Church's control over its own schools and universities. First, the curriculum requirements would insert more Bolivarianism into instruction. Second, the textbooks would have to pass Bolivarian review. Third, the draft law inserts Education Ministry supervisors or directors into the schools and their governing bodies. Fourth, the draft law requires social service in BRV-designated programs in order to graduate or receive degrees. The Cardinal thought the education law

might bring serious opposition out on the streets. The Nuncio asked if he really saw that degree of passion in the opposition right now. Reconsidering, the Cardinal acknowledged that he probably did not.

Tending the Venezuela Flock in the U.S.

18. (C) The Cardinal, like the Archbishop of Maracaibo the week before (reftel), noted that there are now perhaps 200,000 Venezuelans living more or less permanently in the United States. The majority are in south Florida. The Venezuelan Church is discussing plans to dispatch a team of two or three priests on two or three year assignments to minister to them. The Cardinal asked that the U.S. Embassy adjudicate such religious visa applications favorably. The Ambassador responded that the Embassy would give due consideration of such applications consistent with the rules and regulations of U.S. law.

19. (C) AMBASSADOR'S COMMENT. The Cardinal strikes me as a man who is aware that his institution is under attack by the BRV, and is preparing for a long struggle, but is not willing to take on his challenger in direct confrontation. At least, not yet. We ought to support him to the extent we can.

BROWNFIELD